

Sage-Grouse Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries SGI

SGI: The Untold Story of Sage-Grouse Conservation on Working Lands

Since 2010, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and its partners in the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) have worked with private landowners to restore 4.4 million acres of habitat for sage-grouse while maintaining working landscapes across the West. The effort has become the model for voluntary, incentive-based conservation at its best, and through conservation science and partnerships at the federal, state and local levels, NRCS is making a huge impact for conservation and agriculture. NRCS has provided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) with a comprehensive evaluation of SGI's contributions to threat reduction for sage-grouse and enhanced ecosystem function on private lands. This report will help inform FWS's decision as the whether to list this candidate species for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

About the Sage-Grouse Initiative

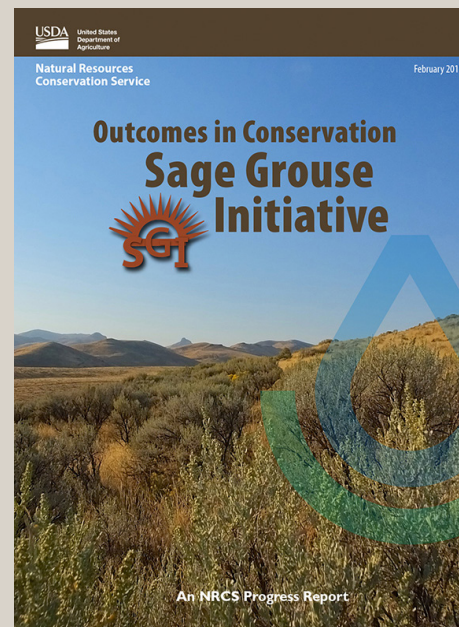
SGI is a partnership of ranchers, state and federal agencies, universities, nonprofit groups, and businesses that embrace a common vision: wildlife

conservation through sustainable ranching. Launched by NRCS in 2010, SGI applies the power of the Farm Bill to conserve and restore lands where habitats are intact and sage-grouse numbers are highest — covering 78 million acres across 11 western states: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Five years since its launch, SGI has catalyzed sagebrush conservation on private lands across the West, providing win-win solutions to threats facing ranching, sage-grouse and 350 other species that depend on the sagebrush habitat. These aren't random acts of conservation, and effective, science-based targeting has been a cornerstone of SGI success since inception. For every SGI practice, at least 3 of every 4 acres, or 75 percent, are located in Priority Areas of Conservation (PAC).

By the Numbers

Through 2014, 1,129 ranches have participated in SGI, conserving 4.4



million acres, an area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. NRCS has invested \$296.5 million, and partners and landowners have provided an additional \$128 million, bringing total SGI investment to \$424.5 million.

NRCS-sponsored conservation easements now cover 451,884 acres, combating subdivision and agricultural conversion threats. Easement acquisition during SGI increased 1,809 percent, adding 361,984 acres in just four years. Easements are four



2014 Progress Report

California
Colorado
Idaho

Montana
Nevada
North Dakota

Oregon
South Dakota
Utah

Washington
Wyoming

times larger inside sage-grouse range with nearly all acquisitions providing permanent protection. Additionally, NRCS and SGI focus on removing invading conifers early, and cuts have reclaimed 405,241 acres of habitat. For example, NRCS has invested \$18.4 million through SGI on-the-ground restoration in Oregon, helping more than 100 ranchers remove conifers from 200,000 acres of key nesting, brood-rearing and wintering habitats, addressing 68 percent of the conifer threat to Oregon's sage-grouse population on priority private land.

'Good for the Bird, Good for the Herd'

SGI is enhancing rangeland health and sage-grouse habitat by applying grazing systems, revegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses, and controlling invasive weeds. Collectively, 83

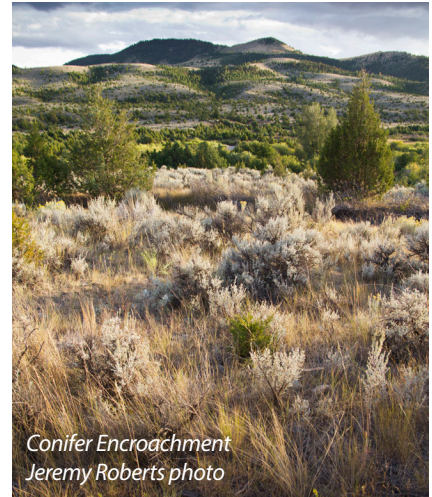
percent of weed management, 76 percent of seeding projects, and 75 percent of grazing systems have been implemented inside PACs.

NRCS' Commitment to the Future of Sage-grouse Conservation

NRCS is committing \$200 million to SGI over the life of the 2014 Farm Bill, providing partners with certainty that conservation will continue well into the future. This infusion will bring the total investment to approximately \$750 million, enabling SGI to conserve an estimated 8 million acres through 2018. And this year, NRCS is piloting use of its Conservation Stewardship Program to broaden the impacts of SGI by targeting up to 275,000 acres to enhance sage-grouse habitat in 2015 alone.

SGI is living proof that wildlife and agriculture can coexist and thrive in

harmony. The steps NRCS is taking to improve habitat and outcomes for sage-grouse and other wildlife are good for cattle, good for ranching operations, and good for America's rural economy.



*Conifer Encroachment
Jeremy Roberts photo*

Past (FY 2010-FY 2014) and future (FY 2015-FY 2018) SGI Funding, Estimated Partner Match and Projected Acreage of Additional Conservation (in millions)



| Past Accomplishments | NRCS | Partner Match | Total (\$) | Total (Ac) |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Restoration and enhancement | 102.4 | 34.1 | 136.5 | 4.0 |
| Conservation easements | 164.7 | 85.7 | 250.4 | 0.4 |
| Human Capacity | 29.4 | 8.2 | 37.6 | |
| Subtotal | 296.5 | 128 | 424.5 | 4.4 |
| Outyear Commitments | NRCS | Estimated Partner Match | Estimated Total (\$) | Estimated Total (Ac) |
| Restoration and enhancement | 80.0 | 26.7 | 106.7 | 3.4 |
| Conservation easements | 100.0 | 100.0 | 200.0 | 0.2 |
| Human Capacity | 17.6 | 2.5 | 20.1 | |
| Subtotal | 197.6 | 129.2 | 326.8 | 3.6 |
| Total SGI Investment | 494.1 | 257.2 | 751.3 | 8.0 |

From Oregon . . .

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Chris Mundy, NRCS District Conservationist, Crook County, Oregon



Feature Story

Oregon Rancher Creates a Safe Haven for Sage Grouse

Rancher Gary Bedortha takes a group for a bumpy ride to the top of the grassy mountains behind his ranch house near Paulina, Oregon. His 4WD pickup climbs through a pocket of aspen and pine to an open ridgeline that overlooks thousands of acres of prime sage-grouse habitat in Central Oregon. Purple lupine is beginning to bloom in between native grasses and sagebrush.

"We might just see some birds up here," Bedortha says, noting that the whole area inside and around his ranch has healthy sage-grouse populations.

None of the secretive sage-grouse appeared, but we saw the fine handiwork of Bedortha's work crews, who have cut down all of the invading juniper trees on his private ranch lands and limbed the trees so the woody material lays flat on the ground, blends into the landscape and provides nutrients for the soil. Work crews have been removing junipers on Bedortha's property every year since 2010 through assistance from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service as part of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI). They've treated about 12,000 acres so far.

On Bedortha's property, the results are impressive. Bedortha looks out from the mountaintop and says, "If you see any juniper trees out

there, they're on somebody else's land."

Chris Mundy, NRCS district conservationist for Crook County, laughs as he reflects on how fast things have changed in such a short time, "Before SGI, we used to be able to look across the landscape and recognize who cut what juniper stands but now we can only see who hasn't." Mundy serves as a trusted resource expert for Bedortha and other ranchers in Crook County, Oregon. There are a few juniper trees visible here and there, but on Bedortha's property they are mostly gone. The landscape is wide open, with healthy sagebrush-steppe habitat, forbs and wildflowers blooming, and that's the way sage grouse like it.

Bedortha's land reflects a new strategy that is guiding juniper-removal projects in Oregon and sweeping across the West — focus on removing the juniper trees and other conifers that are invading the most productive sage grouse habitat.

NRCS officials collaborated with sage-grouse experts at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop the strategy of removing trees in the first stages of encroachment in places that

matter most to grouse. Once juniper trees have become a solid forest with little understory of sagebrush and bunchgrasses remaining, it's much tougher to return that land to historic sagebrush-steppe.

"Most of our work today prioritizes prevention," adds Jeremy Maestas, who serves as the NRCS technical lead for SGI, based out of Redmond, Oregon.

Bedortha was the first rancher in the Paulina and Crook County area to enroll in SGI. He's led the way for other ranchers to get involved by showing that conservation that benefits sage-grouse is also good for healthy grazing lands.

"My father always said that we're here for a very short time, and it's important to improve the resource you have for future generations. We feel our cattle numbers are sustainable over the long haul. The end result is the pounds of beef that we put on our cows, and the income we get from that that provides for everything else we do to care for the land."

— Story by Steve Suebner,
Sage Grouse Initiative



View of Bedortha Ranch
Jeremy Maestas photo